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ABSTRACT

This letter reviews actions by the New York State Education Department and New York City Board of Education as of January 2002 to implement recommendations contained in a prior audit report. The audit found that the Department and the Board did not always perform adequate analysis to determine the effectiveness of various consultant programs being used by schools to improve performance on state standardized tests. It also found that improvement programs were not always effective, and some schools were able to improve performance without any program help. The follow-up review found that the Department and the Board made considerable progress in implementing prior audit report recommendations. This letter describes improvements related to the six prior audit report recommendations: developing the capability to adequately determine which resource allocation and program initiatives work most and least effectively at improving academic performance; ensuring that all school improvement programs are evaluated independently for effectiveness; determining why some school improvement programs are more effective than others; monitoring performance trends at below-standard schools and determining which schools are improving and why; ensuring that any revised performance data submitted by schools are verified or appropriately documented; and developing a method for evaluating the performance of schools with small test populations. (SM)

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Office of the State Comptroller, State of New York [Letter to the Commissioner of Education and the Chancellor of New York City Board of Education: Follow-up Review of *Monitoring Improvement Efforts of Schools with Low Standardized Test Scores*]

March 8, 2002

Jerry Barber
Office of the State Comptroller

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OFFICE OF THE STATE COMPTROLLER

March 8, 2002

Mr. Richard Mills
Commissioner of Education
New York State Education Department
State Education Building
Albany, New York 12234

Mr. Harold O. Levy
Chancellor
New York City Board of Education
110 Livingston Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Re: Report 2001-F-53

Dear Mr. Mills and Mr. Levy:

Pursuant to the State Comptroller's authority as set forth in Article V, Section 1 of the State Constitution, Article II, Section 8 of the State Finance Law, and Article III, Section 33 of the General Municipal Law, we have reviewed the actions taken by the New York State Education Department (Department) and New York City Board of Education (Board) as of January 31, 2002 to implement the recommendations contained in our audit report, *Monitoring Improvement Efforts of Schools With Low Standardized Test Scores* (Report 98-S-34). Our report, which was issued on May 10, 2000, assessed the actions taken by the Department and the Board in monitoring the improvement efforts of Schools Under Registration Review (SURR) and other schools performing below the State standard.

Background

The Board of Regents (Regents) is responsible for setting education policies and for guiding, managing and monitoring the education system in New York State. In fulfilling these responsibilities, the Regents work with the Governor and Legislature, who also initiate education programs and ultimately control the State funds devoted to education. The 16 Regents are elected for five-year terms by the Legislature and are headed by a Chancellor. The Regents are served by the Department, which administers the State's education policies and programs. The Department oversees local school boards and monitors compliance with education laws and regulations.

The State education system is primarily a decentralized operation, rooted in the concept of local autonomy. There are about 700 local school boards across the State making daily operating decisions for about 4,111 individual schools. Further, the Board oversees all public schools in New York City. The Regents also supervises the Board, but various sections of the State Education Law assign many responsibilities specifically to the Board. The Regents require that all students take certain standardized tests to measure whether they have achieved the State learning standards. As a result, each year the Department analyzes how students at each school in the State performed on these tests. Based on the criteria established in the Commissioner's Regulations, each year the Commissioner determines which schools achieved State standards, were below standards, or were farthest from State standards. Schools that are farthest from State standards, and are determined by the Commissioner to be most in need of improvement, are identified as Schools Under Registration Review (SURR). Each school in this category is visited regularly and monitored by Department staff that review the school's operations and recommend operational improvements.

Summary Conclusions

In our prior audit, we found that the Department and the Board did not always perform adequate analysis to determine the effectiveness of various consultant programs being used by schools to improve performance on State standardized tests. Also, we found that the improvement programs were not always effective and some schools were able to improve their performance without the help of these costly programs.

In our follow-up review, we found that the Department and the Board have made considerable progress in implementing our prior audit report recommendations. For example, the Department is using the school "report cards" to monitor trends at low performing schools and is also developing a survey instrument to help identify programs which work most effectively. The Department and the Board have also taken steps to strengthen efforts to evaluate improvement programs.

Summary of Status of Prior Audit Recommendations

Of the six prior audit report recommendations, four were applicable to the Department and two were applicable to the Department and the Board. The Department implemented three and partially implemented one of the four recommendations applicable to it. The two recommendations applicable to the Board and the Department were partially implemented based primarily on steps undertaken by the Department.

Follow-up Observations

To the Department:

Recommendation 1

Develop the capability to adequately determine which resource allocation, and which program initiatives work most effectively and which work less effectively at improving academic performance in given school settings.

Status - Partially Implemented

Agency Action - The Department, in collaboration with its New York City Regional Network at the Teacher Center (Center), and a consultant, the Center for Resource Management (CRM), is developing a survey instrument to help Department officials determine what they should do to improve student academic achievement. This includes the identification of specific programs to improve academic performance. However, at the time of our follow-up review, work on the instrument had not been completed. The Center was field-testing the instrument to ensure that it met the Department's standards for validity and reliability. Although the Center did develop a timeline for the completion of the project, due to circumstances beyond its control (e.g. the September 11, 2001 incident), the completion is delayed. Department officials anticipate completion of this project by September 2002.

To the Department and the Board:

Recommendation 2

Ensure that all school improvement programs are evaluated independently to determine the extent to which they are effective at improving student scores on standardized tests.

Status - Partially Implemented

Agency Action - Department officials indicated that they have authority to evaluate only those programs directly under Department control. Nonetheless, the Department and the Board are participating in the statewide Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program, which is a federal initiative that is designed to increase student achievement through the use of comprehensive research-based reform models. The CSRD program is designed for completion over a period of three years ending in the fall of 2002. The CSRD includes focus group interviews, onsite visits, case studies, and a survey to identify programs that work effectively.

The Department has also worked with the Center and the CRM to develop several technical manuals and guides that help district officials to choose a CSRD model that offers the "best fit" to a school's program of services. These manuals also address the correlation between the models and State guidance on teaching and assessment. According to Department officials, these documents are made available to the districts through the Department website, workshops, training, the CSRD newsletter and manuals/guides for staff use.

The Board's Division of Assessment and Accountability also evaluated selected CSRD reform programs. However, this evaluation generally did not address the extent to which individual school improvement programs are effective. The Board's Comprehensive Evaluation Report concluded that a definite statement regarding the success of certain programs could not be made, because of the small number of schools utilizing research-based programs. In addition, the Board stated that it is over simplistic to attribute improvement in student achievement simply to the impact of a single program.

Furthermore, Board officials suggested that in their view certain other factors must be considered in evaluating programs' effectiveness. The Board stated that similar to the CSRD program, the programs adopted by schools are already research-based, that many programs require students to acquire skills before achievement can be raised, and that even sound researched programs are influenced by other factors that contribute to the success or failure of the initiative.

To the Department and the Board:

Recommendation 3

Determine why some school improvement programs are more effective than others, and determine whether certain types of programs are likely to be more effective in certain circumstances.

Status - Partially Implemented

Agency Action - The Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, Inc. (a Department consultant) and the CRM formally studied the CSRD initiative. The study indicated that CSRD schools implemented reform models in very different ways. The study also suggested that some school reform models might be more successful than others in broadening teacher use of good instructional practices and improving educational outcomes. The study rates the overall assessment of the reform models as encouraging. In addition, officials developed a series of CSRD technical manuals to assist school districts to select the kind of programs that work best for their environment and is presently working on phase three of the technical manual aimed at improving academic performance.

The Board's Division of Assessment and Accountability also assessed the CSRD program through a survey that asked teachers and district CSRD liaisons about changes in program models. A report issued during the 1999-2000 year indicated that teachers had changed teaching methods as a result of the reform effort and parents received increased information regarding the new learning standards. Also, the report indicated that the school reform model significantly enhanced curriculums and instructional materials.

The Board, however, questioned the benefit of evaluating individual improvement programs after New York City schools implemented them. Board officials advised us that programs adopted by schools are research-based and have previously contributed to increased academic achievement outside of New York City. Officials also stated that there are limitations in determining why some school programs are more effective than others. Officials noted that implementing programs in certain schools might take additional time due to organization changes and school culture. Further, the Board stated that systematic reform does not happen quickly. Rather, it often takes several years.

To the Department:

Recommendation 4

Monitor performance trends at below-standard schools, determine which schools are improving, identify the reasons for the improvement, and recommend that the effective practices be adopted at the below-standard schools where performance is not improving.

Status - Implemented

Agency Action - Each year, the Department publishes a "report card" for each public school in the State. The report card notes a school's performance on tests for English language arts and mathematics in the fourth and eighth grades. The Department also issues report cards for high schools based on students' performance on Regents examinations. The report cards indicate performance over the preceding three-year period, and thereby, provide an indication of trends in schools' performance on the standardized tests.

In addition, Department officials evaluated 100 schools that have improved performance on the elementary English language arts assessment for 1999, 2000 and 2001. The evaluation indicated areas where improvement was strong and recommended that local school boards implement similar strategies through the System of Accountability for Student Success (SASS) initiative. Officials further indicated that low performing schools can access the Department's "Sharing Success" internet site to research programs that other districts consider successful.

To the Department:

Recommendation 5

Ensure that any revised performance data submitted by a school is either verified or appropriately documented.

Status - Implemented

Agency Action - Department officials stated that presently there are four steps being used to verify student data. These steps include internal data validation, actual sign-off by superintendents, continuous Department checks including audits; and checks performed by the Regional Information Centers which process student data for school districts outside of the big five cities. Furthermore, the Department is providing technical assistance to school districts to assist in the completion of the data forms.

In addition, the Department is continuing efforts to improve performance data through development of the individual student data collection system with student identification numbers that are unique statewide. In the past, the Department has relied on aggregated school-level data to monitor school's performance. Beginning with the 2001-2002 school year, the Department will collect all student performance data in individual

student records. The records will be submitted with a student identification number unique to the school district. These efforts should minimize the need to revise student performance data.

To the Department:

Recommendation 6

Develop a method for evaluating the performance of schools with small test populations.

Status - Implemented

Agency Action - According to Department officials, this has been accomplished through SASS. Specifically, by using test data from multiple years for a school with fewer than 20 students, officials develop a performance index that is compared to the State standard for a given year. The long-term goal is that 90 percent of students achieve the standard. With regard to the standards, schools are placed in one of the three categories such as meeting the State standard, below standard, and farthest from standard. Preliminary results indicated that 17 schools with fewer than 20 students were the farthest from the standard category. However, most all of these schools serve special education students only, which explains why their performance was low. This evaluation also disclosed that the small number of rural schools with small test populations generally performed adequately on the tests.

Major contributors to this report were Brian Mason, Arthur F. Smith, Don Wilson and Alexander Marshall.

We would appreciate your response to this report within 30 days, indicating any actions planned to address the unresolved issues discussed in this report. We also thank Department and Board management and staff for the courtesies and cooperation extended to our auditor during this review.

Very truly yours

Jerry Barber
Audit Director

cc: Deirdre Taylor, DOB